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The Urbanisation of Rural China

Gotelind Müller (ed.), *Designing History in East Asian Textbooks: Identity politics and transnational aspirations*

London and New York, Routledge, 2011, 290 pp.

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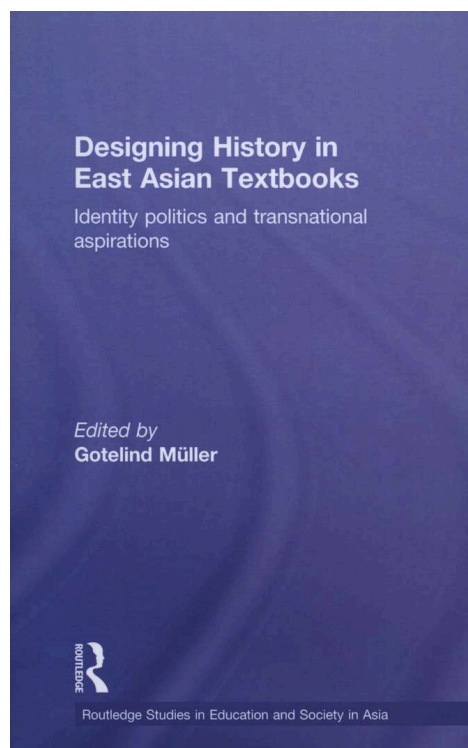
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- 1 When the twentieth century dawned with the echoes of boots and guns, it became apparent that the national stories told in textbooks meant for innocent school children, with pronounced distinctions between indigenous “us” and foreign “them,” could further stoke unfolding conflicts. Very soon it was realised that school textbooks – especially of history and geography – could be the source of and subject to conflicts, on the one hand by presenting a Manichean vision of national “us” and foreign “them,” and on the other by producing incomplete and partial stories of a shared past. It is clear that a century later this is still the case. Whereas the European project has created a space favourable to the elaboration of reflective textbooks often conceived through collaboration, that has not been the case in other regions of the world



such as the Middle East or Asia. In East Asia, the most frequently cited case is that of revisionist Japanese textbooks, which intermittently provoke the wrath of people in neighbouring countries.¹ Among the reasons given for the impossibility of reconciliation with Japan is its presumed denial of its aggressive past, especially in history textbooks. Even though, as in Europe, history textbooks in East Asia have also been an issue for more than a century, the controversies of 1982, 1986, 2001, and 2005 further added to the tensions. A positive outcome of these crises has been the increasingly sustained attention paid to the issue by European and Asian scholars, especially over the past ten years. Unsurprisingly many recently published works such as *History Education and National Identity in East Asia* (2005) and *Education as a Political Tool in Asia* (2009) are centred on themes developed by Western researchers, such as issues of identity, and look at history textbooks as vectors of national identity.

- 2 *Designing History in East Asian textbooks* (2011) by Gotelind Müller is the fruit of a two-year research project she undertook at the University of Heidelberg (Germany) and follows the path trodden by the two works cited above, recognising that history poses a special challenge in the formation of national identities. Müller says: “Though history is not the only school subject related to official projects of identity formation, it is often the prime curricular vehicle for official programmes of political socialisation” (p. 1).
- 3 Like most works on the subject, this book takes a regional approach, situating the issues dealt with in an international relations framework. The questions sustaining the 12 chapters and the linkages among them may be summed up as follows: despite the memory of past conflicts, is it possible to envisage an integrated identity in the China-Japan-Korea region? What do the “selves” and “others” discourses in East Asian school textbooks reveal as regards the politics and identity aspirations of different groups in power in the region?
- 4 The response to these important questions are set out in 12 chapters arranged in three parts: the first part deals with “the historical contingencies that frame contestations of views on East Asia,” the second presents three practical cases, and the third offers regional perspectives on overcoming transnational conflicts. The first part, relatively large and perhaps the most interesting, brings together studies by university scholars on textbooks and education policies in four states or regions: China (PRC), Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Japan. An introductory chapter by Sun Ge, an expert on the intellectual history of China and Japan, attempts to explain the difficulties Chinese society faces in adopting an Asian or East Asian consciousness. In this lightly reworked version of a 2009 article in Chinese, Sun Ge considers the perspectives that could lead to an East Asian consciousness (Confucianism, modernisation, or “traumatic memories of war”) to be so feeble, imprecise, and differently interpreted or adopted at the national level that they cannot at present contribute effectively to an “East Asian narrative.” On the contrary, the historical and geopolitical consequences of the Cold War (various countries’ divergent relations with the United States, Chinese Third-Worldism, Ideological tensions, Korean iron curtain...) remain strong. Moreover, the blurred definition of the concept of Asia created in opposition to that of the West, as well as memories of the Pan-Asian tendencies at the beginning of the last century, stymie the construction of a clear identity. The next four contributions deal with the obstacles thrown up by different education policies to a shared historical vision of East Asia. Gotelind Müller (Chapter 2) analyses among others how current Chinese textbooks and curricula depict Europe and the European integration project, and interpret it as the

official perspective on projects of regional integration, East Asian in particular. Through a structural division of Japanese textbooks between “selves” and “others,” Klaus Vollmer (Chapter 3) observes the return of *Nihonron* (日本論, “discourse on Japan”), in vogue during the 1970-1980 decade, magnifying the “singularity” of Japan’s culture and development. A similar phenomenon may be noted in Taiwan, where recent texts such as “Knowing Taiwan” (*Renshi Taiwan* 認識臺灣) offer a new identity discourse narrating “stories of an island nation” (Chapter 5). In Hong Kong, on the other hand, Edward Vickers (Chapter 5) examines the Beijing authorities’ efforts, relayed through local authorities, to reintegrate the former British colony into Chinese patriotic discourse.

- 5 In the following three chapters, historians who were engaged in putting together history textbooks explain the practical considerations that informed their work. This second and somewhat shorter part features Su Zhiliang, editor of Shanghai secondary school history textbooks that sparked a debate in 2006²; Li Fan, author of history textbooks and historian at Beijing Normal University; and Miyake Akimasa, editor of history textbooks for Japanese schools. This part focuses on Japan and China and the degree of freedom enjoyed by textbook authors in dealing with the histories of countries far and near, in light of each country’s education system.
- 6 The third part adopts a transnational approach, and through a focus on conflicts over interpreting the past offers paths of reflection and methodological approaches for overcoming them. The emphasis is on dissension and attempts at reconciliation between Japan and South Korea through the analysis of Japanese revisionism and formation of bi-national working groups on revision and production of history textbooks. A chapter by Falk Pingel, consultant to UNESCO on its school textbooks programme and long the deputy director of the Georg Eckert Institute for International Textbook Research, concludes this last part with a reflection on the reasons for the failures and successes of previous attempts at conflict mediation linked to school textbooks around the world. He offers what sets out to be a pragmatic approach; he also questions the need to imitate the European model and the suitability of a common textbook for China, Japan, and South Korea.
- 7 *Designing History in East Asian textbooks* is an interesting and informative work on several accounts. Contrary to what the title might suggest, the papers presented do not restrict themselves to school and history textbooks. In the fourth chapter entitled “Learning to love the motherland,” Edward Vickers – who co-edited the two works cited in the introductory paragraph above – studies the various controls put in place by the central government in Beijing since Hong Kong’s 1997 handover in order to “renationalise” it. Vickers convincingly shows that “national education” (*guoqing jiaoyu* 国情教育) applied in Hong Kong affects not only textbooks but all educational activities, such as museum programmes and cultural events. In Chapter 9, Steffi Richter, who specialises in East Asian and especially Japanese historiography, shows how the revisionist discourse in history texts published by the extreme right is relayed through a general context seeking to challenge the interpretation of history that emerged from the Tokyo War Crimes Trials (1945-1948). While history texts published by the *Tsukurukai* have focused attention on revisionist demands (denial of “Nanjing Massacre,” of Comfort Women, etc., and more broadly, opposition to the Tokyo Trials’ “masochist” vision), Richter shows how two films – *The Seven “Death-row Prisoners”* (2007) and *Best Wishes for Tomorrow* (2008) – are part of a Japanese “vernacular memory” challenging the officially

promoted one.³ The first film is the first part of a documentary trilogy entitled *The Truth of Nanjing* questioning the Nanjing Massacre. The director, who is part of a circle around *Tsukurukai*, managed to present his film during private screenings throughout the country in 2008. An interesting annexe (“Excursus”) on the problems posed by the Tokyo Trials and the judgement on Japanese war crimes recalls how American interests influenced Japanese memory, especially by deciding to spare Emperor Hirohito and his entourage: in letting off the supreme representative of the state, the United States was only condemning militarism, not the popular support it enjoyed. In Chapter 3, Klaus Vollmer adopts a different approach by examining Japanese civic education and high school ethics textbooks, noting that historical questions are not limited to history textbooks alone but arise whenever society, economy, religion, and traditions are touched on. This precise and intelligent comparative study of the most used textbooks and of nationalist texts published by *Tsukurukai* (representing less than 1% of books actually used in Japanese educational establishments) combines iconographic, textual, and structural analyses of lessons. Studying the way human rights are dealt with, Vollmer shows that the dominant narrative discourse in the textbooks even today follows a vision that borrows from North American and European models, which *Tsukurukai*’s texts seek to counter and deconstruct. Apart from denying Japan’s culpability in the series of wars in the 1930s and 1940s, these revisionist texts also amount to another effort by conservative Japanese intellectuals and the right-wing to promote a political agenda challenging the bases of post-war dominant Japanese discourses on society, democracy, and power (p. 65).⁴ Chapter 2, on the other hand, highlights the influence of the political agenda on history programmes and textbooks. Analysing the long period of national history programmes in Republican China and then in the PRC, Müller examines how different political contexts could lead to some opposing conceptions of “others” in China, and, by contrast, what these standard views tell us of the political and ideological priorities of those in power. More specifically with regard to Europe, she notes: “Europe’s historical image [...] remains strongly tied to imperialism and capitalism, but it is noticeable that, at present, these aspects are more downplayed, whereas Europe as a cultural ‘model’ in the sense of (past) greatness, for example with ‘great people’ and scientific achievements, comes up again [...]” (p. 51).

- 8 The book’s other major merit is the space it gives textbook authors to explain their work. While Li Fan (Chapter 6) expounds on practical difficulties in matching the narration of complex historical events (such as “inter-ethnic” wars among Han, Jin, Manchu, Mongols, etc.) to the educational aims of national identification and patriotism, Su Zhiliang dwells at length (Chapter 7) on the way in which Japan and the Japanese were described in the PRC textbooks and then in the ones he edited in Shanghai. Extracts cited by Su confirm that political agendas – even regional – inform and guide representations of the nation or of foreign countries. Some parts of Japanese history, for instance, help justify capitalist economic reforms or the need for a constitutional government (on the Meiji Restoration and post-war models) or even to promote the image of a basically pacifist China combating all forms of imperialism and revisionism. The account by Miyake, who compiled Japanese history textbooks, contrasts with that of his predecessors, pointing to greater freedom in producing schoolbooks. In fact, despite a kind of self-satisfaction that can be found in other accounts, Miyake goes over the process that led him and his collaborators to introduce in their books some texts on Japan written by foreign experts. However, among the seven texts under the title “Views from across the world: An open space for dialogue,”

there are authors from South Korea, India, Germany, the United States, Australia, and even one from Morocco but, astonishingly, none from China!

- 9 The impression emerging from the work – from the way it has been put together and from some authors' conclusions – is that aspirations to construct a transnational memory are more present in Japan and South Korea than in China, which is still engaged in unifying its national territory. The way the book has been arranged engenders this impression: four of the five chapters in the first part dealing with "Contesting East Asia" are devoted to the Chinese nation as envisaged in Beijing, whereas China is absent from the third and last part devoted to perspectives on historical reconciliation. Of course, the current Chinese priority of unifying the nation is not the only obstacle in the way of reconciliation⁵ and regional integration, as there is growing nationalism and negativist discourse in Japan too. North Korea's absence from the memorial debates is no mean obstacle, as Chung Jae-jong observes in Chapter 10. But then, as he notes, the existence of a "private sector" (independent of officialdom) of historians free from political pressures is not a condition equally met in the three major countries in the region, which moreover have different political systems and do not offer uniform possibilities of dialogue.
- 10 Finally, the need for and the potential for a memorial reconciliation among Japan, China, and Korea are effectively put into perspective in Müller's work, whose weighty contributions offer a detailed and painstaking analysis of the aspirations and identity politics at play in the region. It is clear that the "European model" of integration will not be exportable just yet.

NOTES

1. See: Samuel Guex, "Les manuels d'histoire japonais vus de Chine" (Chinese view of Japanese history textbooks), *Ebisu*, No. 38, 2007, pp. 25-54; Daniel Sneider, "Les manuels d'histoire et la guerre en Asie: des interprétations divergentes" (History textbooks and war in Asia: Diverging interpretations), <http://nippon.com/fr/in-depth/a00703/> (accessed on 19 July 2013).
2. After the *New York Times* carried an article entitled "Where's Mao? Chinese Revise History Books," 1 September 2006.
3. On "official memory" and a certain double discourse of the Japanese right, see Tetsuya Takahashi's article in French, "Le Procès de Tôkyô, l'empereur et la question du Yasukuni" (The Tokyo Trials, the Emperor, and the Yasukuni issue) <http://droitcultures.revues.org/2027#tocto1n2> (accessed on 19 July 2013).
4. "[Instead I will look at the Tsukurukai civics textbook] as another effort by conservative and right-wing Japanese intellectuals to promote a political agenda that aims at challenging basic assumptions of post-war Japanese mainstream discourse on society, democracy and power" (p. 65).
5. Müller says: "Probably, only when feeling strong and secure in itself, will China find the vision of regional integration more attractive, but then from a strong position in the world and in the region, (...) so that (...) it might treat on its own conditions." (p. 52)

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